

The Seed of Woman

By Martin Pickup

The LORD God said to the serpent,
“Because you have done this,
Cursed are you more than all cattle,
And more than every beast of the field.
On your belly you will go,
And dust you will eat all the days of your life;
And I will put enmity between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise you on the head,
And you shall bruise him on the heel.”

Gen. 3:14-15

The above prophecy has been called the *protoevangelium* of the Bible — the first place in Scripture where the gospel of Jesus Christ is foretold. It is an apt designation. According to clear New Testament statements, the curse upon the serpent in Genesis 3:14-15 was a curse upon Satan and a prediction of his eventual defeat and the defeat of all who follow his path of rebellion against God (Rev. 12:9; 20:2). What we have here is the very first prophecy of the Bible, one that sets up all that Scripture will subsequently say about sin, human redemption, and God’s victory over the devil. In this paper I want to analyze this Old Testament text and the way in which the ancient Jews and the New Testament writers interpreted it.¹ What we will discover is how foundational this passage is to the teaching of the entire Bible.

¹ In this paper my discussions of ancient Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament are not offered as proofs of what the Old Testament must be saying. That authoritative posture is reserved for the inspired authors of the New Testament. However, I believe that there is great benefit in studying how ancient readers read the Scriptures. Sometimes it can open our modern eyes to possible interpretations that we do not readily think of because of our remote perspective. It also can help us to understand better what the New Testament writers are saying when they use common terms and allusions in their exegesis of the Old Testament. The study of contemporaneous Jewish literature helps reveal the hermeneutic and religious milieu of the New Testament books, allowing us to read them within their historical context.

THE BEGINNING OF SIN UPON THE EARTH

The Book of Genesis forms an introduction to the rest of the Pentateuch. Genesis has two major sections: a *primeval history* of the human race (chs. 1-11), and *patriarchal narratives* (chs. 12-50). The primeval history explains how sin corrupted God's perfect world, compelling him to come in judgment with a flood. Afterwards, the human race sinned again and God divided humanity into various nations. By the time of the writing of Genesis, all of these nations had become ignorant of the true God. The patriarchal narratives recount God's attempt to remedy this situation by fashioning a godly nation from the seed of Abraham as the object and means of divine blessing.

Genesis 3 is part of an initial unit of material (2:4-4:26) that introduces the primeval history.² This material explains how the corruption of humanity began with the sin of the first human couple and spread to their offspring. Because people did not trust what God told them, transgression, selfishness, vengeance and murder tainted God's world (2:17; 4:6-7). Genesis says that it was the serpent who initially planted doubt about God's veracity. It is interesting that when Moses introduces the talking serpent in 3:1, he does so without any explanation as to why this creature can do what he does. It is as if he expects his readers not to be surprised by the figure at all. Perhaps this was because the story of Genesis 3 had been told for generations among the children of Abraham.

According to Genesis 3:1 the serpent came to Eve in the garden and said, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" This overstated Yahweh's prohibition and

² The structure of Genesis is demarcated by the recurring phrase *'elleh tōlēdōt*, which can be translated, "These are the generations of ..." or "this is the story of ..." In its ten usages the phrase seems to function as an introduction to a new section of material, though some scholars argue that at times (perhaps in 2:4) it may conclude a section. See Hamilton 2-10; LaSor 68-70.

made him appear unreasonable for restricting any of the trees of Eden. When the woman explains that God only disallowed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that it was for their own good — “lest you die” — the serpent flatly denies what God said and suggests that God’s motive was to keep the man and woman from attaining his level of divine knowledge (vv. 4-5).

There was some truth in the serpent’s assertion. The forbidden fruit was not poisonous, and Adam and Eve did not literally die on the day they ate of it. They now knew about good and evil and so, in a sense, were like God (cf. 3:22). But theirs was an experiential knowledge, one that was born of sin. The serpent had made God seem mendacious and self-serving, but it would soon become clear that God’s warning about the negative outcome of eating the fruit was indeed true — true on a higher level than Eve had previously considered.

THE CURSE UPON THE SERPENT

The latter half of Genesis 3 records a trilogy of curses upon the three beings involved in humanity’s downfall: the serpent, the woman, and the man. The curses pertain to their respective roles and relationships (Hamilton 196). The woman will suffer pain in her role as child-bearer and be subservient to her husband. The man, though created from the ground, will now struggle to get the ground to produce edible vegetation. God’s maledictions upon the woman and the man, though severe, were still indirect, mediated curses, and thus they reflected a degree of divine mercy which the serpent does not receive (Kidner 71). A cursed ground would make it difficult for the man to bring forth the fruit of the ground, a cursed womb would make it difficult for the woman to bring forth the fruit of her womb, but the serpent is cursed directly. “Cursed are you,” God says to the creature — a personal execration and the harshest punishment of all.

It is possible to understand the words “cursed are you above (*min*) all cattle ...” to mean that all animals were cursed by God, the serpent only more so (Willis 128). Some Rabbinic interpreters understood the Hebrew in this way, apparently seeing the serpent as representative of all animal life to some degree (*Genesis Rabbah* 20.4). Many of the ancients believed that all creatures originally had the gift of human speech, but the curse brought an end to this degree of familiarity between humans and the animal world (*Antiquities* 1:41; *Apocalypse of Moses* 11:2; *Jubilees* 3:28; 12:26). But it is also possible to understand the Hebrew to mean that the curse is upon the serpent alone — that he would be cursed “away from” (i.e., banished from) all other creatures of the garden (Hamilton 194; Westermann 258-259).

God’s statement that the serpent will crawl on his belly is often regarded as an explanation for why snakes have no legs (Willis 121; Westerman 259). Some Rabbinic interpreters claimed that, prior to this curse, snakes walked on four legs as do other garden animals (*Genesis Rabbah* 19.1) But this etiological interpretation seems doubtful. One would not take literally the next expression, “and dust you will eat,” so we may be dealing here with a poetic way of predicting the humiliation and degradation of the serpent by using language that reflected a snake’s means of locomotion (Hamilton 196; Kidner 70). Since snakes crawl in the dust, this prompted the use of that image to indicate the serpent’s subjugation (Leupold 162).

The Serpent and The Seed of the Woman

Verse 15 records the climax of the serpent’s curse.

*And I will put enmity between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise you on the head,
And you shall bruise him on the heel.”*

This prophecy promises a future hostility between the serpent and the woman, an hostility that will extend to their respective seeds. Yet the parallelism of the verse is interesting. In 15a the woman is put in opposition to the serpent, but in 15b the woman's seed is not put in opposition to the serpent's seed, but to the serpent himself. Thus, though the serpent's fate no doubt determines the fate of his offspring, the focal point of the prophecy is the conflict between the serpent and the seed of the woman (LaSor 83).

The Hebrew word for seed, *zera`*, is generally used in Scripture as a collective singular noun—i.e., it refers to a group of offspring, viewed corporately (Kaiser, *Zāra`* 253). The word can refer to the totality of a person's descendants, or it can be limited to a particular line of descendants, but the collective nature of the singular noun is evident in either case. On a few occasions *zera`* refers to an individual descendant of a man rather than to a group, but in these cases the individual is an immediate descendant and is viewed as the progenitor of a lineage yet to be born (e.g., Gen. 4:25). Therefore Genesis 3:15 seems to be referring to descendants of the woman and descendants of the serpent.

The verse indicates their mutual conflict by twice using the Hebrew word *shûph*, a verb of uncertain meaning that might be translated “bruise,” “crush,” or “strike at.”³ Whatever translation is adopted, the verse certainly indicates some kind of attack upon the head of the serpent and upon the heel of the woman's seed.⁴ The intended imagery appears to be that of a man seeking to kill a

³ Part of the translators' difficulty is in trying to be consistent in the two usages of *shûph*, for it would seem that whatever the woman's seed does to the serpent, the serpent does to the woman's seed (Hamilton 198). Yet we are dealing here with Hebrew poetry, and the potential for wordplay should caution us against thinking that the two usages of the verb must have precisely the same sense. A snake's attack of a man's heel may not constitute the same type of assault as a man's treading upon a snake's head.

⁴ The Septuagint's use of the Greek verb *tēreō* (“to watch, keep”) is particularly curious. But it possibly carries the sense here of “watch in order to attack,” “lie in wait” (Lust, et al.). In Romans 16:20 Paul, alluding to Genesis 3:15, uses the verb *suntribō* (“crush, shatter”).

snake by stamping its head with his foot, and the snake responding by trying to bite the man's heel.⁵ An attack upon the heel may also suggest the serpent's attempt to take over the position of man, in accordance with a Hebrew idiom where grabbing another's heel signified supplanting (cf. Gen. 25:26). Likewise, treading upon the head of an enemy was a common figure in the ancient world to denote the subjugation of one's foes (cf. 2 Sam. 22:39; Psa. 8:6; 41:9; 110:1). Both of these ideas may be suggested by the imagery of Genesis 3:15.

Modern interpreters commonly assert that this passage says nothing about the defeat of the serpent (Willis 129-130). Since the bite of a venomous snake could be as deadly to a man as a crushed head would be to a snake, the verse could imply that the serpent's attack on the woman's seed will be just as deadly as her seed's attack on the serpent. All the passage says, we are told, is that there will be mutual hostility between human beings and snakes, with each group attacking the other and nothing implied about either group being victorious (e.g., Von Rad 93; Westermann 259-260). But it must be remembered that the serpent is being cursed in this passage! That fact strongly indicates that this verse is intended as a prediction of the serpent's defeat by the seed of the woman. It is the culmination of the degradation indicated in v. 14. This is how ancient Jewish interpreters understood it (e.g., *Targum Neofiti*), and it is also how the apostle Paul interprets the prophecy in Romans 16:20 (a passage I will discuss subsequently).

⁵ It is commonly suggested that the image is that of a man injuring his heel when he stamps on a serpent's head. The point, then, is that a hurt heel is only a minor injury for a man compared to the mortal wound that a snake suffers if its head is trampled. I am not certain that ancient readers of Genesis would have taken the imagery in this way. It is clear that many did not do so. (They instead saw the injury upon the woman's seed occurring as result of the serpent's bite; e.g., *Targum Neofiti*; *Life of Adam and Eve* 37:1-3.) Nor do I see anything to indicate that New Testament writers understood the imagery in this way. I suspect that this common view of the passage arises from the tendency of many Christians to apply the prophecy exclusively to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the occasion when Jesus defeated Satan by means of his own suffering. As I argue later in this paper, the prophecy should be understood more broadly than this, as encompassing the conflict between all of God's people and Satan. (At the risk of being accused of talking out of both sides of my mouth, however, I acknowledge that we are dealing here with biblical poetry. There may be some fluidity in how the wording is to be interpreted from application to application.)

There is another significant feature of this prophecy that must not be overlooked: the seed who will bring about the defeat of the serpent is called the *woman's* seed, not the man's seed. Obviously, the descendants of Eve are the descendants of Adam also. But it is the female role that receives the emphasis here. God is saying to the serpent that the woman whom he beguiled into bringing about the fall of man will, ironically, become the instrument of the serpent's own demise. Woman's unique capacity as a child-bearer will enable the birth of seed who will gain victory over the serpent and his offspring.

Genesis 3 and the Rest of the Pentateuch

Some readers of Genesis fail to appreciate how the events of chapter 3 and its trilogy of curses provide a background for the remainder of Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch. Looking at the primeval history of Genesis, for example, the name that Adam gives to the woman, *Eve* (meaning "life"), and the names she gives to the initial generation of children she bears, hark back to the promise of Genesis 3 (Garrett 189; Kidner 72, 74, 78). Also, God's words to the murderer Cain, "Cursed are you," are an exact repetition of the direct curse God had pronounced upon the serpent. The implication is that Cain's lot has been cast with the serpent. The curse upon Cain is actually an intensification of the initial curse of the ground that God had directed toward the man: Cain is cursed from the ground, meaning that it "will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth" (4:12). He is therefore consigned to a nomadic existence — a lifestyle as far removed from the paradisiacal garden as it could be.

The mortality of the lineage of Adam and Eve, the result of humanity's banishment from the garden's tree of life, is stressed in the genealogy of chapter 5 with the recurring refrain "... and he died...." The birth of Noah is heralded with a reminiscence of Genesis 3: Lamech names his son

Noah, saying “This one will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed” (Gen. 5:29). The salvation of the human race indeed comes about through Noah, whom God rescues along with his family at the time of the great flood. Because of Noah’s righteousness, humanity receives another chance and the promise of Genesis 3:15 remains alive.⁶

The theological issue that underlies all we read in the rest of Genesis is the very issue raised in the mind of Eve by the serpent, viz., whether God’s words are trustworthy. The patriarchal narratives of Genesis constantly emphasize the integrity of God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his 12 sons are called upon to have faith in the promised blessings of God, and the events in their lives show that God is true to his word even when human beings are dishonest.

The promise to Abraham is predicated upon his seed’s receiving a land where they can live a sedentary lifestyle reminiscent of Eden, rather than having to wander nomadically like Cain. The rest of the Pentateuch continues this theme, for the Law of Moses is a law code designed to establish a sedentary, agrarian society in Canaan. Such a lifestyle is viewed as the ideal — as a close approximation of the original state of unfallen man in the garden of Eden. The entire Pentateuch is predicated upon the idea that a nomadic lifestyle is a cursed lifestyle, but the quiescent lifestyle of the Mosaic system is a superior existence where one can dwell peacefully in the presence of God.

The above examples demonstrate the importance of Genesis 3 in setting up the story that Genesis and the Pentateuch are telling. The curse upon the serpent is particularly crucial in this

⁶ Blenkinsopp (58, 86) argues that the account of the serpent and the Fall is paralleled by the story of Ham’s sin against Noah during Noah’s state of nakedness.

regard.⁷ I agree with T. Desmond Alexander's comment on the prophecy of Genesis 3:15: "Unfortunately, most commentators miss the obvious connection which exists between this reference to 'seed' and the fact that Genesis highlights a particular line of 'seed' ... The implication is surely that the divine pronouncement against the serpent will be fulfilled through the divinely chosen family lineage" (35).⁸ Genesis teaches that the seed of the woman who will gain victory over the serpent is a particular line of humanity, a line that is traced through Shem, through Noah, and then through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The post-deluvian world continued to sin against God, and the nations that emerged failed to retain a knowledge of him. The message of Genesis is that God's promise will be fulfilled through a particular segment of humanity, a seed of woman whom God would raise up through the lineage of Abraham.

Genesis 3:15 also provides the background for the many occasions in Genesis where key women have difficulty conceiving children. The fecundity of these women is crucial, for if the matriarchs of God's promised lineage cannot conceive offspring, then the victory over the serpent cannot be realized. Yet we read of the apparent inability of Sarah to become pregnant—likewise Rebekah, and then Rachel. The serpent's battle against the seed of woman has begun. But God intervenes in each case and these women do bear offspring. The lesson here is that God's promises will not fail.

⁷ Von Rad (87-88) could not be more wrong when he says that the serpent is really incidental to the Genesis story.

⁸ This way of reading the Book of Genesis is reflected in the *Life of Adam and Eve*, a late first-century work, the Latin version of which records God's saying the following to Adam: "Because your days are numbered, you have been made to cherish knowledge; therefore, there shall not be abolished from your seed forever those who would serve me" (27:3). This indicates an understanding that the promise of Genesis 3:15 would be fulfilled through the righteous of Adam's descendants.

WHO IS THE SERPENT?

Satan

The identification of the serpent of Genesis 3 is a controversial issue in modern times. The text of Genesis gives no identification beyond what we read in v. 1: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.” On the surface it would seem impossible for the New Testament to be correct when it identifies the serpent as Satan, the angelic accuser of God’s people who is rarely mentioned in the Old Testament and never in the Pentateuch (unless this passage is the exception). Liberal commentators discount the New Testament’s interpretation and treat the talking serpent of Genesis 3 as a fairy-tale figure of Jewish folklore, a symbol of human temptation or of the power of evil (e.g., Westermann 237; Von Rad 87).

Yet the New Testament writers treat the events of Genesis 3 as historical fact, and they clearly connect the serpent with Satan. The Book of Revelation could not be more explicit.

^{12:7} And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, ⁸ and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

^{20:1} Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ² And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³ and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer.

Other passages indicate that Paul also understood the serpent who tempted Eve to be Satan (Rom. 16:20 and 2 Cor. 11:3-14).⁹ This seems to be the reason why he is called “the tempter” in Matthew

⁹ Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 11:14 about Satan disguising himself as an angel of light parallels what is said in the *Apocalypse of Moses* 17:1. There the serpent (Satan) behaves as an angel of God in order to more effectively persuade Eve to eat of the fruit (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14).

4:3 and 1 Thessalonians 3:5. In John 8:44 Jesus alludes to the events of Genesis 3 when he says that the devil was a liar and a murderer from the beginning.¹⁰

Since the New Testament writers clearly connect the serpent with Satan, they presumably understood the “seed” of the serpent to be the wicked angels whom Satan rules (Matt. 9:34; 25:41). Yet it would seem that human beings can also be a part of the serpent’s offspring since Jesus tells a recalcitrant group of his countrymen, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44; cf. 1 John 3:8-10).

Liberal scholars may object to the New Testament’s identification of the serpent and Satan, but Christianity was not unique in its reading of Genesis 3. Ancient Jews commonly associated the serpent with Satan. For example, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, a late first-century work, said that the devil possessed a serpent in order to tempt Eve: “The devil said to [the serpent], ‘Do not fear; only become my vessel, and I will speak a word through your mouth by which you will be able to deceive’” (16:1-5).¹¹ In *1 Enoch* 69:6 (first-century BC), the angel Michael speaks of the serpent as the wicked angel who rebelled against God: “This is the one who showed all the deadly blows to the sons of men, and he led Eve astray, and he showed the weapons of death to the children of men.” In *4 Maccabees* 18:7-8 (first-century AD), a woman avers her virginity by saying, “No deceiver in the field corrupted me, nor did the seducing and beguiling serpent defile my maidenly

¹⁰ The idea of the devil as a murderer from the beginning may allude to the sentence of death that resulted from the eating of the forbidden fruit or the banishment from the tree of life. There may also be an allusion to the sin of Cain in Genesis 4.

¹¹ In *Apocalypse of Moses* 21:3 the devil is said to be speaking through Eve when she induces Adam to eat the forbidden fruit.

purity.” The allusion to Genesis 3 is obvious and, in the context, its language is used to speak of demonic spirits (Anderson 563).¹²

Though Satan is not mentioned by name in the Pentateuch, ancient Jewish interpreters read Genesis with the understanding that he and his demonic entourage were present during those events, if only just behind the scene. New Testament authors had the same conception. The Book of Jude, for example, accepts as accurate the oral tradition of the dispute between Satan and the archangel Michael over the body of Moses. This was a well-known extra-canonical expansion of Deuteronomy 34:6, “And [God] buried him in the valley in the land of Moab.”¹³

The fact of the matter is that the New Testament writers and the ancient Jews shared the same dualistic view of the spiritual world; they believed that unseen spiritual beings or angels were a part of God’s creation, some of them obedient to God and some of them disobedient. Indeed most of the things that the New Testament says about the spiritual realm — e.g., the concepts of Satan, demons, principalities and powers, heaven and hell — are not presented as novel teachings, but as part of an undisputed cosmology that the original audiences were assumed to understand (Fuller 342; Bruce 104-107). To be sure, there are some differences between Jewish apocalyptic literature and the New Testament when it comes to cosmology, but these differences must not be exaggerated.¹⁴ It is clear that the New Testament writers accept as essentially correct the Jewish

¹² The association of Satan with the serpent is also seen in *Wisdom of Solomon* 2:23-24 (late first-century BC) and in 2 *Enoch* 29:4-5 (first-century AD).

¹³ This story was apparently contained in the ancient work *The Assumption of Moses*, for so say several of the post-apostolic Church Fathers. The passage has not survived, however, in any currently extant witnesses of the work. Some scholars assume that Jude is quoting from *The Assumption*, but I think it better to presume that both works recounted well-known tradition.

¹⁴ Unger (33-34) argues that the New Testament concept is very dissimilar to contemporary Judaism, but his methodology for drawing this conclusion is to assume that Rabbinic documents (AD 200-600) necessarily reveal 1st century conceptions—a bogus methodology that, unfortunately, has not completely been discarded today.

conception of the spiritual realm, as well as the common way of understanding the primeval history of Genesis.¹⁵ This includes the understanding of who the serpent of the garden really was.

The Rationale for this Interpretation

If the New Testament's identification of the serpent with Satan reflects a standard Jewish reading of Genesis, on what basis was such an interpretation derived? We never read in Genesis of a being called Satan, the devil, Beelzebul, etc., nor do we encounter any angelic being corresponding to him. The serpent of chapter 3 is not even described as a spirit, but as a "beast of the field." So how can the Jewish-Christian reading of Genesis 3 be legitimate?

While it is true that Genesis describes the serpent as a garden animal, it is also true that this serpent is no ordinary snake. It speaks, it reasons, it beguiles, it opposes God.¹⁶ It has all the characteristics of personhood, and is condemned by God as if it is a free-will agent. Nor does the serpent's curse take these characteristics away (Boyd 157). If this creature is nothing more than a snake, and if the story is intended merely as an etiology to explain the fear that people feel for snakes, why emphasize people's fear of this animal above that of other dangerous creatures? (Kugel 73). Since the serpent of Genesis 3 is so unique, is it any wonder that Jewish readers would seek an explanation of him in later passages of Scripture that speak of a spiritual foe of God who accuses God's people? The fact that Genesis called this creature a serpent and a beast of the field would not have prevented its being an evil spirit. Jewish thinking frequently associated evil spirits with earthly beasts; e.g., the goat of Leviticus 17:7 and the night hag of Isaiah 34:14 were

¹⁵ The cosmological debate between first-century Christians and Jews had nothing to do with heaven and hell, or Satan and his angels, but only with the nature and identity of the Messiah and his kingdom.

¹⁶ Some modern interpreters have claimed that the serpent of Genesis 3 is not even portrayed as an opponent of God so much as an enemy of woman (e.g., Von Rad 87-88). But this seems to me to be an absurd conclusion to draw from the text. The serpent's words of beguilement are an affront to the integrity of Yahweh himself. The curse that Yahweh pronounces upon the serpent clearly shows that God views the serpent as having made himself an enemy of God.

interpreted this way (Aune 919).¹⁷ In the ancient Near Eastern world demons and spiritual beings were often pictured in the form of serpents (Boyd 156).

Modern liberal scholars tend to regard the figure of Satan as a much later conception in Jewish theology, perhaps prompted by the cosmic dualism of the Persians whom Israel served in captivity. While I would not rule out a measure of Persian influence in Scripture's terminology and manner of depicting the spiritual realm (after all, God has always been willing to accommodate his explanation of the supernatural to the perspective of man), nevertheless, the basic idea of God and his righteous angels being opposed by spirits who rebelled against their Creator's authority is a cosmology that was well supported in the early writings of the Old Testament (see Twelftre 164; Fuller 341).¹⁸

The Pentateuch itself manifested this concept. Deuteronomy 32:8 says, "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated humankind, he set the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the children of God."¹⁹ Interpreters generally recognize that the phrase "children of God" here refers to angels, a reading corroborated by the Septuagint's "angels of God" (Block 13-22). In verse 43 these angels are called "gods" and are warned to bow

¹⁷ Cf. Luke 10:19. See note 34 below.

¹⁸ There is a seeming inconsistency in the way that the Old Testament presents these ideas. The Book of Job depicts Satan as a spiritual being who can act against man only within the strict limits permitted by God (cf. Luke 22:31). But elsewhere we read of spiritual beings in overt opposition to God (e.g., Daniel 10-12). But we need to remember that the Bible is having to accommodate its revelation of spiritual realities to the limited perspective of human beings. Strict consistency may therefore be beyond what we should expect to see. The overall message of Scripture, however, is quite clear: God is in control of all things, and his ultimate purpose will never be thwarted.

¹⁹ This English translation is from Abegg, Flint, and Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*. It reflects the reading of Deut. 32:8 found in one of the Qumran fragments, 4QDeut^l. Most English translations rely upon the Masoretic Text which says "sons of Israel." The proper reading is probably that provided by the translation above, "children (sons) of God." It is supported not only by the Qumran fragment, but by the Septuagint. See the discussion of this textual variant in Abegg, et al. 191.

before Yahweh before he comes in judgment.²⁰ These statements in Deuteronomy correspond to other Old Testament texts that speak of wicked angels who lead the nations (e.g., Dan. 10:13-21 and Psa. 82).²¹ The cosmology is not taught so much as it is alluded to — as something already quite well-known—viz., that Yahweh appointed certain angels over the nations of the world but they rebelled against his authority and pridefully accepted worship that rightly belonged to Yahweh. The pagan world concocted elaborate, false mythologies around these beings as well as worship rituals. Deuteronomy 32 goes on to speak of how Israel rebuffed Yahweh’s unique and personal relationship, and adopted instead the paganism of the Gentiles: “They sacrificed to demons who were not God” (v. 17).

This, therefore, is the theological milieu of the Pentateuch. In order to interpret Genesis properly, one must remember that the world-view within which it operates is one wherein angelic beings have rebelled against the true God and seek to induce the same rebellion in human beings. It is not difficult to see why Jewish and Christian interpreters would see the serpent of Genesis 3, a creature who opposes God and induces Eve to commit sin, as one of these rebellious angels — indeed, as their leader.²²

Reinforcing this understanding of the text is the fact that Genesis 6 explicitly discusses angels who rebel against God and are responsible for the corruption of the human race that leads to

²⁰ This verse is quoted by the Hebrew writer in Hebrews 1:6, following the reading of the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text, due to a scribal error, omits this entire line, but it is found in the Qumran fragment 4QDeut⁹.

²¹ For a further discussion of this idea of the rebellious angels of God, see Martin Pickup, “Old Testament Citations in the Gospel Of John,” in *God So Loved. Studies in the Gospel of John* (Florida College Press, 2002): 35-39.

²² The idea that the Satan-figure of Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 was the leader of the rebellious angels of old may itself have been a similar deduction. It is in the intertestamental Jewish literature that we first see this understanding and it is corroborated by the New Testament. Thus, the concept of Satan undergoes development. The Satan of Job and Zechariah is an adversary of God and man, but is not depicted as the kind of arch-enemy that we see later.

the great flood. At least this is how ancient Jews and Christians customarily understood the reference in Genesis 6:1-4 to the “sons of God” who took the daughters of men as wives and sired children by them. Jewish intertestamental literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls are replete with this interpretation of the passage, and it also has some attestation in Rabbinic documents. Even modern scholars generally agree that this is the proper understanding of the passage. Some conservative scholars argue that the “sons of God” are not angelic beings, but are the apostate lineage of Seth (Leupold 249-254) or perhaps human kings who resorted to polygamy (Kline 187-204). But neither of these interpretations does justice to the text of Genesis 6 nor to several New Testament passages that appear to take an angelic interpretation of that text (viz., 1 Peter 3:18-22; 2 Peter 2:4-5; Jude 6).²³ Thus, the primeval history of Genesis climaxes in chapter 6 with an account of spiritual beings who rebel against God and encourage humanity to rebel as well, with the result that divine judgment is pronounced upon the human race. The parallel between this event and the incident of Genesis 3 is quite precise, particularly if one interprets the serpent of Genesis 3 to be a spiritual being as well.

But if the creature who tempted Eve was really Satan — a supernatural being — why would he take the form of a serpent of the garden? The passage’s minimal information does not allow us to answer such a question with certainty. But it may be that taking the form of a garden animal was Satan’s way of accommodating to the level of Adam and Eve so as to appear non-threatening. One must not overlook the fact that even God appears to manifest himself to

²³ For a discussion of the pros and cons of the angelic interpretation of the “sons of God” in Genesis 6, see Hamilton 261-265; Youngblood, *Genesis Debate* 184-209; Unger 45-52; Leupold 249-259. I have, somewhat reluctantly, come to accept the angelic interpretation as the most viable view, though there are many questions that it raises that cannot be addressed here. Still, when the New Testament’s allusions to Genesis 6 are compared with contemporaneous Jewish literature, it seems most likely that the New Testament writers also assume the angelic interpretation.

Adam and Eve in the form of a physical being—viz., a human being who “walks in the garden in the cool of the day” (3:8). God and man seem to share a physical resemblance in the garden, in keeping with the fact that man is made in the image of God. Though the Bible will later indicate that God is Spirit and that man’s being made in his image actually pertains to their spiritual, rational, and moral nature, God makes himself known in the garden anthropomorphically. Adam and Eve could not relate to him intimately on earth in any other way. By the same token, neither could they relate with Satan as a spiritual being. So it may be that in the garden Satan takes the form of a serpent, and God takes the form of man.

But if the serpent is really Satan, why does Genesis identify him only as a serpent and not as a spiritual being? Why do we have to rely upon later revelation to clarify the real nature of the serpent? This is the chief objection of many people to the identification of the serpent with Satan. But again, God himself is not depicted in Genesis 3 as a *spiritual* being per se. Were it not for later revelation, we would not know that the anthropomorphic form of God in Genesis 3 is not his true nature but that God is actually Spirit.

It is also worth considering that *the account* of these events may be, to some degree, accommodative and symbolic. Genesis may use the serpent motif because it is borrowing imagery from the mythological culture of that day regarding a cosmological foe of Deity. Old Testament writers commonly take features of well-known pagan myths and rework them in order to present the truth of Israelite monotheism. Psalms 29 and 74, for example, recast poetic images about Baal, the storm god, into depictions of Yahweh as the Lord of nature (Craigie 143-151). Isaiah 27 and Psalm 74 transform stories about Baal’s primeval defeat of Leviathan, the god of chaos, into accounts of Yahweh’s defeat of this creature when he brought order to creation (Emerton 327-328;

Hugenberger 109). Many scholars suggest that this kind of reshaping of pagan themes into a presentation of monotheistic truth is, to some degree, what Genesis is doing in its creation account (Boyd 84-85). It is interesting that in the ancient world Leviathan was depicted as a draconic serpent with seven heads (cf. Isaiah 27:1; Psa. 74:14) and Revelation 12 makes use of this same figure to depict Satan: “And behold, a great red dragon having seven heads ... And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan” (Rev. 12:3, 9).

It is possible, therefore, that Genesis recounted man’s primeval fall using the language and symbology that was best suited for its original audience. Since ancient creation myths gave a serpentine form to the being who opposed the order of creation, it was fitting that the tempter in the garden be depicted in this way (Boyd 156). Such a literary device may have been quite obvious to the original audience of Genesis.²⁴

It may be that later Jews and Christians recognized all of the above factors when they drew the conclusion that the serpent of Genesis 3 was Satan. There was no other reasonable conclusion to draw than that which the apostle John so succinctly expressed: “The serpent of old ... is the devil and Satan” (Rev. 20:2). What we see here is a “translation” of the antique theological images of

²⁴ The possibility I raise in the above two paragraphs is one that was misunderstood by some readers when this paper was originally published in 2003. Some readers took me to be suggesting that I thought Genesis 3 might not record historical fact or that its account of the serpent tempting Eve was a myth. Nothing could be further from the truth. (See my clarification in *Watchman Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 5 [Oct., 2003]). In the current revised version of the paper, I have chosen to retain the original wording of the above two paragraphs so that readers may see what I originally wrote. But it needs to be understood that the view I suggest is simply that Moses, rather than saying that Satan took the form of a snake when he tempted Eve, instead used the language of “the serpent” among the “beasts of the field” as a way of designating Satan himself because this was the terminology that the people of Moses’ day used when they wanted to refer to that wicked spiritual being. In later biblical history the chief spiritual opponent of God is called by various names (many of which are metaphorical): e.g., Satan, Beelzebub, the devil, the tempter, the dragon, etc. But the earliest appellation may have been “the serpent,” a term that, while metaphorical, appropriately designated this evil being who, with great subtlety, brought the chaos of sin into the garden of Eden. The possibility that God had Moses use a metaphorical name to designate Satan is all that I am suggesting here. This view is held only by conservative scholars (e.g., W. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 38-39), and certainly should not be confused with the mythological view of Genesis 3 and the serpent that I refute in the earlier portion of this paper.

Genesis into the kind of cosmic language that had become commonplace by the Greco-Roman period. Yet the essence of what Genesis relates is unaltered.²⁵

WHO IS THE SEED OF THE WOMAN?

The Messiah

If Genesis 3:15 is foretelling the defeat of Satan and his followers, then as Christians we must understand the reference to the seed of the woman in terms of Jesus Christ. No New Testament passage explicitly applies this prophecy to Jesus, but that is probably due to the obviousness of the fulfillment and the fact that no occasion arose requiring an explicit reference.²⁶ Several New Testament passages, however, do allude to Genesis 3:15 and treat it messianically. For example, one cannot fail to think of God's curse upon the serpent when reading the following words of the apostle John: "The devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8; see also Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim 2:15; Eph. 1:20-22). Clearly, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection was the decisive blow upon the head of Satan.

Ancient Jews also read Genesis 3:15 in terms of the Messiah (though they never thought in terms of a crucified Messiah).²⁷ *Targum Neofiti* (c. AD 100) says that the serpent's oppression of

²⁵ It is not necessary to think that Moses and the exodus generation of Israel had as detailed a conception about this opponent of God as we see in later Old Testament or New Testament texts. The serpent-image may be different nomenclature and even offer a more physical image than the spiritual one offered by rebellious-angel imagery. But we are dealing with a measure of accommodation in either case, and the essential conception being conveyed is the same, whether one thinks in terms of a talking, reasoning serpent in the pristine garden who seeks to undermine God's purposes, or whether we think in terms of a rebellious angelic being in heaven.

²⁶ Another example of such an occurrence would be the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Few Christians would fail to see a typological reference to the crucifixion of Jesus, yet no New Testament passage ever explicitly connects the sacrifice of Isaac to that of Jesus.

²⁷ Fee is grossly mistaken when he says that "nowhere in all of Jewish interpretation was Genesis 3:15 ever understood to mean anything other than the natural enmity between humans and poisonous reptiles" (75).

the people of God would come to an end “in the day of the King Messiah.” The earliest messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 appears to be found in the Septuagint’s translation of the prophecy (Martin 425-427). The Greek word for “seed,” *sperma*, is a neuter noun. Thus, if the woman’s seed is taken as a collective singular and refers to the offspring of the woman corporately, then the next line ought to be rendered with the neuter pronoun *auto*, giving the meaning, “it [i.e., the corporate group of the woman’s descendants] shall bruise you on the head.” But the Septuagint translators chose instead to use the masculine pronoun *autos*, giving the meaning, “he [i.e., a singular individual] shall bruise you on the head.”²⁸ The Septuagint translators apparently understood the prophecy to refer (at least primarily) to an individual descendant of a woman, and the messianic king is the only individual ever known to be attached to this prophecy (Hamilton 199). It would seem, therefore, that the messianic reading of Genesis 3:15 goes back at least as early as c. 250 BC, the time when the Septuagint translation of the Pentateuch was made.

But why did ancient readers interpret Genesis 3:15 messianically? Because they read Old Testament passages in light of what the entire canon of Scripture unfolded about God’s plan. This hermeneutic approach was standard among ancient Jews and it differs from the strictly grammatical-historical method of modern scholarship. The latter method reads each Old Testament book as an individual and autonomous document since these books were written by different authors writing at widely divergent times. Sometimes even an individual document is further analyzed according to its (alleged) sources and their own (alleged) peculiar meaning. The result is a piecemeal approach to studying the Scriptures. But the approach used by ancient Jews (and Christians) was to read any given passage canonically, that is, in light of what other relevant

²⁸ The actual verb that the Septuagint uses here is “watch” (*tēreō*), but this difference is not germane to the issue of a messianic understanding of the prophecy. See note 4 above.

portions of the canon had to say. The entire corpus of Scripture is treated as one Book, the product of one omniscient Author. Under this method of interpretation, different documents written at different times by different human authors all become, in the final analysis, largely inconsequential considerations.²⁹

From such a perspective there was good reason for a messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15. In its immediate context, the statement about the woman's seed naturally suggests a corporate reference to the entirety of Eve's descendants, i.e., the complete human race to come. But the rest of Genesis narrows down this corporate reference, for God makes a special covenant with Abraham and his descendants, which implies that the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 will be fulfilled through this portion of humanity (Gen. 12:1-3). Even this group is narrowed down further. Abraham becomes the father of a multitude of nations and therefore has several "seeds." Genesis indicates that the seed of promise will be a particular lineage of Abraham, the seed of Jacob (Gen. 22:18; 28:12-14). Thus, the unfolding story of Genesis nuances one's understanding of who the promised seed of the woman is intended to be (Kaiser, *Old Testament* 154). The Abrahamic promise qualifies the promise of Genesis 3:15.

²⁹ For more information about this ancient method of interpretation, see James Kugel's *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997); Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Martin Pickup, "New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: The Theological Rationale of Midrashic Exegesis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (June 2008), 353-381. Unlike Kugel, I believe that the fundamental basis of this ancient hermeneutic was the Jewish recognition of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

But the rest of inspired Scripture qualifies the Abrahamic promise. The prophets declared that the royal seed of David would have dominion in the last days and a messianic king would lead the eschatological seed of Abraham in the defeat of all of God's enemies (Isa. 11:1-16; Amos 9:11-15; Psa. 2, 110). Ancient readers of Scripture could not help but view Genesis 3:15 in light of later prophecies about the royal seed of David, prophecies that Jews ultimately interpreted in a messianic sense. After all, the Messiah would "crush" his enemies (Psa. 89:24) and make them "lick the dust" (Psa. 72:9); they would fall "under [his] feet" when he "crushed them and stamped them" (2 Sam. 22:39, 43; Psa. 110:1).

This intertextual reading of various passages so as to connect them with Genesis 3:15 becomes even more attractive when one realizes that the enemies the Messiah is to defeat are the pagan nations who, as we noted before, were understood to be ruled by the rebellious angels of Satan. Micah 7:17 says that the defeated nations will "lick the dust like a serpent," a statement that would likely have been read as an allusion to the curse of the serpent in Genesis (Day and Jordan 418). The same can be said of the promise of Isaiah 65:25 concerning the fall of the enemies of God: "And dust will be the serpent's food" (Sailhamer 16). Psalm 91, whose words were recited in attempts to exorcize demons, may especially have contributed to the messianic way of understanding Genesis 3:15.

"For He will give orders to His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. In their hands they will lift you up, so that you do not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the cobra and the viper; you will trample underfoot the strong young lion and the serpent."³⁰

³⁰ This reading is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Abegg, et al., 541-542). The fact that this psalm was commonly used in exorcisms helps to explain why Satan quotes it in the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:11).

Along this same line we should note the oracle against Tyre in Ezekiel 28. It is obvious that Ezekiel uses images from Genesis 3 to speak of Tyre's fall, but he speaks of more than the fall of human rulers; he also tells of the fall of the angelic powers associated with this prideful city (Blenkinsopp 65). Though many evangelical interpreters try to see in this text a *direct* reference to the prehistorical fall of Satan (e.g., Unger 15), that interpretation of the prophecy has generally been discounted (Westermann 246). Nevertheless, it seems to me that the language used in the prophecy does reflect the familiar cosmology of rebellious angelic powers who lead the nations of the world. Jewish readers could hardly have failed to see some allusion here to the struggle against Satanic powers that Genesis 3 predicts.

In view of Old Testament prophecy, the writers of the New Testament recognized that the ultimate goal of Jesus' kingship was the subjugation of all spiritual powers who opposed God. Paul says that Jesus ascended to the heavenly throne and put in subjection under his feet "all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:20-22); he "disarmed the rulers and authorities" and "made a public display of them, having triumphed over them" (Col. 2:15). Again and again the New Testament emphasizes Jesus' opposition to, and ultimate defeat of Satan and the angels who oppose God (see e.g., Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 3:18-22; Heb 1:4-14; Rev. 12:1-17; 20:1-15).

Born of a Woman

The enmity predicted in Genesis 3:15 is an enmity between the serpent and woman, and it is her seed who will tread upon the serpent's head. This emphasis upon the woman, as we noted before, reflects the idea that even though a female was beguiled by the serpent into causing the downfall of man, the female sex would bear the promised seed and become the means of the

serpent's defeat. Later Old Testament prophecies elaborate upon the special role of woman in God's plan. Isaiah 7:14 says, "Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." This passage is treated messianically in the New Testament, and is interpreted as a prediction of the virgin conception of Jesus (Matt. 1:23). Micah 5, a parallel passage, foretells the restoration of the Davidic throne in the person of the messianic king: "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you one will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity. Therefore He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child."

Genesis 3 also helps us to understand a curious comment Paul makes in Galatians 4:4: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, *born of a woman*, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law." Every child is obviously brought into this world by means of a mother, so why would the apostle emphasize this point in regard to Jesus? It may be that Paul is merely using this expression to indicate the humanity of Jesus (cf. Matt. 11:11), but it seems to me that the apostle is doing more than that here.³¹ Paul's comment makes the most sense if we understand his words as an allusion to the prophecy of Genesis 3 (Cole 115). It taught that the serpent would be defeated by the seed of *woman*, and it made no reference to the seed of man. As we observed earlier, the focus upon the woman reflects the idea that the means of

³¹ I am not persuaded by the argument that Job's use of the phrase "born of woman" (14:1) proves that it is only intended as a way of referring to one's humanity (Brown 518-519). In view of the other uses of this expression in Job, it seems most likely to me that Job is referring to the taint upon the female because of her ability to lead men into sinfulness; it is actually an allusion back to the role of woman in initiating the fall of man in the garden. (Job 25:4 says, "How can he be clean who is born of woman?" Cf. 15:14.) The deceivability of women and their power over men so that they lead them into sin are ideas that are stressed throughout the Scriptures (e.g., Ecc. 7:28; 1 Tim. 2:14). Therefore, the use of the expression "born of woman" in Job actually enhances the argument that Paul is alluding to the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 when he uses the phrase.

the serpent's defeat would be the child-bearing capability of the female whom the serpent had used to induce man's fall.

It may also be that Paul is alluding to the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. The phrase "born of woman" does not require it, but if Paul is alluding to Genesis 3:15 here, it is hard for me not to think that he had this doctrine in mind.³² The Book of Genesis emphasized the prophecy's focus on the female role of child-bearing by noting that the key matriarchs of the Abrahamic lineage were often barren and able to conceive only by divine intervention. The gospel of Christ proclaimed that divine intervention was also required for the messiah's birth, and in a most unique way: Jesus was not sired by any human father; he was miraculously conceived in the womb of a virgin. This great miracle was all part of God's plan, and though no one before the gospel era could have anticipated it from reading Genesis 3:15, in retrospect the words of the prophecy perfectly fit the reality of the virgin conception of Jesus.³³ In a unique sense, it would be "her seed" and not his (man's) seed who would crush the serpent's head.

In view of the significance of Genesis 3:15 in biblical teaching, it surely is no coincidence that the first time Satan appears in the Book of Revelation, in the vision of chapter 12, he is introduced along with a pregnant woman who gives birth to a male child. Satan opposes the woman and tries to devour her child, but the child escapes and ascends to the heavenly throne of God. Satan and his angels then wage war in heaven, are overcome by God's righteous angels, and are cast down to the earth. There Satan persecutes the woman and the rest of her children, those

³² One reason why many scholars deny that Paul alludes here to Jesus' virgin birth is because they assume that the absence in Paul's letters of any explicit discussion of the doctrine indicates that he was ignorant of it (Brown 519). This unwarranted liberal assumption is the result of a low view of both inspiration and apostleship. It was Luke who recorded the account of Jesus' miraculous birth (Luke 1:26-37). If the apostle's traveling companion knew of this important doctrine about Jesus, how could the apostle himself have been ignorant of it?

³³ Irenaeus is the first of numerous post-apostolic writers to interpret Genesis 3:15 and Galatians 4:4 as references to the virgin conception of Jesus (*Against Heresies* 4.40.3; 5.21.1).

who maintain the testimony of Jesus. There have been several suggestions as to who the woman in this vision represents. Some suggest the Church, others Mary the mother of Jesus. But it seems more likely that she symbolizes the Jewish nation or, better still, the righteous remnant of that nation (Hailey 268). In any case, it is clear that the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 provides the basis for this entire vision.

The People of the Messiah

Does the messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 exhaust the meaning of the prophecy? In other words, is the seed of the woman to be understood exclusively of the Messiah? Ancient Jews certainly didn't think so. Even though they believed that the work of the Messiah was a key element of the prophecy, ancient Jews recognized that "seed" (*zera`*) is a collective noun and that it had a corporate sense throughout Scripture.

Consider the following excerpt from *Targum Neofiti*, a late first-century Aramaic paraphrase of Genesis 3:15. (The non-italicized portion is the translation of the biblical text, the italicized portion is an interpretive paraphrase).

And I will put hostility between you and the woman,
 And between your children and her children.
And when her children guard the Torah and keep the commandments they will aim against you and strike you on your head and kill you.
And when they forsake the commandments of the Torah, you will take aim and bite them on their heels and cause them to sicken.
However, there will be a cure for her children, but for you there will be no cure.
For in the future they will find relief in the Remnant [of Israel?] in the day of the King Messiah."

The author of this targum understands the defeat of the serpent to be the result of more than just the activity of the Messiah in the end-time. The righteous seed of Abraham strike a blow against the serpent whenever they diligently keep the commandments of God's Law. This interpretation of the passage does complete justice to the corporate nature of the seed of the woman.

What many people fail to recognize is that the New Testament reflects essentially the same understanding of Genesis 3:15. The promised seed of the woman is Jesus the Messiah, but the Messiah *inclusive of his people*. This is evident when we look at Paul's warning in Romans 16 about false teachers.

¹⁸ For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

¹⁹ For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. ²⁰ *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*

Paul's application of Genesis 3:15 to Christians could not be more clear (Reid 866). False teachers who "deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting" are functioning in the same role as Satan in the garden. As Satan beguiled Eve, so he uses human beings to beguile people today. But Christians who resist Satan's advances and expose his error will ultimately be victorious. Paul certainly understood the final victory to come through Christ, but notice that he says, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under *your* feet," not Christ's feet. As Christians, we need to recognize that we also have a part to play in the defeat of Satan and his evil forces. "With her risen Lord the church shares the privilege of fulfilling the prophecy of Genesis 3:15" (Youngblood, *Genesis commentary* 57).³⁴

Sharing the privilege of fulfilling the prophecy also means that Christians must face the attack of the serpent. This idea is presented in Revelation 12:17, a passage that reflects a corporate understanding of the seed of the woman (i.e., the people of the Messiah) with whom the serpent

³⁴ The words of Jesus to his disciples in Luke 10:17-19 should be understood in the same light: "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.' And He said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.'" Jesus' reference to serpents and scorpions probably reflects the ancient practice of connecting demonic powers with certain kinds of animals.

has enmity: “So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Nevertheless, the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 ultimately foretells the defeat of our enemy. As the people of Christ, we will share in his victory.

Liberal scholars often criticize Christianity’s messianic interpretation of Genesis 3 by claiming that it incorrectly interprets a corporate prediction in terms of an individual, Jesus Christ (e.g., Von Rad 93; Westermann 260). But from what we have seen above, this criticism is completely unfounded. The New Testament writers (like the ancient Jews) did *not* understand the prophecy to refer exclusively to the Messiah as an individual, but to the Messiah and his people. The New Testament’s use of Genesis 3:15 accords perfectly with the corporate sense of the word “seed” and with the way in which the Book of Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament interpret the prophecy. The seed of the woman comes to be defined in terms of a single lineage of Abraham, a promised seed that are ultimately ruled by a Messiah of the line of David who leads his people in battle against the enemies of God.³⁵ Thus, the true seed are identified in connection to him.³⁶

Just as the resurrected Christ was elevated above all rule and authority in the heavenly places, so the people of Christ are elevated with him. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been

³⁵ To say that the promised seed are the lineage of Abraham is not to say that all the physical descendants of Abraham are reckoned as the promised seed. The New Testament indicates that they have to be believers like Abraham (Rom. 9:1-9). Nor am I overlooking the New Testament’s teaching that Gentile believers may also be recipients of the promise. But the New Testament regards these Gentiles as becoming part of the seed of Abraham; they are “grafted in” (Rom. 11:17-24).

³⁶ I understand similarly Paul’s comments in Galatians 3 about the promise to Abraham. The promise concerned the seed (singular) of Abraham, not seeds—meaning that the end-time seed of promise consisted of a particular portion of Abraham’s descendants, that one group who would be led by the Messiah. In v. 16 Paul says that the promised seed is “Christ,” but notice that in v. 29 he says that all those who faithfully follow Christ are Abraham’s promised seed. Thus, the promise referred to Christ inclusive of his people.

saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-6). Paul says that the Church was an eternal mystery that was kept hidden in the past “so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (3:10). In times past angelic rulers and authorities rebelled against God and led astray the nations of the world. But God’s great plan was to take men and women from these nations and produce one spiritual nation—a group of people who would honor him and be zealous for righteousness (Tit. 2:11-14).

Salvation Through Child-Bearing

The New Testament’s interpretation of Genesis 3 helps us to understand Paul’s explanation of the requirement of female submission in 1 Timothy 2.

¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women will be saved through child-bearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (NIV)

Verse 15 has been notoriously difficult for interpreters. The major problem is determining what Paul means by “will be saved” (*sōzō*) and why he says this is accomplished by the act of child-bearing. Paul normally uses *sōzō* in the sense of salvation from sin or deliverance in heaven. But how can he suggest that the eternal salvation of women is dependent upon their ability to give birth? That would mean that an unmarried or childless woman has no hope of heaven.³⁷

Some commentators suggest that in this passage Paul uses the word *sōzō* differently than normal, viz., that he speaks of Christian women being preserved through the strain of labor and

³⁷ See Guthrie (77-79) and Moo (70-73) for succinct overviews of various exegetical suggestions that have been proffered to circumvent this problem.

delivery. (Note the translation offered by the NASB: “... *will be preserved* through the bearing of children.”) But this suggestion would have the apostle make an absolute statement that is not absolutely true; Christian mothers do not always survive the process of giving birth. Other commentators believe that eternal salvation is indeed under discussion here, but Paul is referring to the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. This view also seems unlikely because the wording of the verse is too generic to be limited to Jesus’ birth alone (Barnett 234-235).

I believe that the apostle’s point becomes clear when we recognize that he is alluding to what God declared in the beginning to the serpent and to the woman. According to Genesis 3, the eternal salvation of the female sex is dependent upon the female ability to bear children—not individually, but corporately. Though woman was relegated to a child-bearing role, a role that fell under a curse, that role would prove to be the means of salvation. One should note that a singular form of *sōzō* is used here; the verse literally says, “*she* [i.e., the woman corporately] will be saved through child-bearing.”³⁸ In the garden Satan used woman as a pawn to destroy man, but God’s plan was for woman to be the means of the serpent’s defeat, for the female sex would give birth to offspring who would trod Satan underfoot. These offspring, as we noted above, comprise both Christ and his people. In the latter part of verse 15, Paul shifts from a corporate view of woman to a distributive view, saying, “if *they* continue in faith....” The apostle is saying that the child-bearing role is the means of woman’s salvation so long as individual women live lives of submission and respectable decorum. Paul’s words may appear puzzling on the surface, but he is merely giving a succinct recounting of what Genesis 3 teaches.³⁹

³⁸ Unfortunately, many translations (e.g., NASB NIV) obscure the singular number of the verb by interpolating the plural word “women” and loosely rendering v. 15, “But *women* will be”

³⁹ The view I present here is essentially the same as that of Moo (71-73), Moss (63-65), and Fee (75-76), yet even

FINAL THOUGHTS

As Christians we have the tendency to think of God’s eternal plan only in terms of its benefit to us, as if we were the ultimate focus of Scripture, rather than God himself. Thinking anthropocentrically rather than theocentrically, we talk about the Scheme of Redemption as God’s way of forgiving our sins, perhaps overlooking the fact that “redemption is about God’s rule as much as about man’s need” (Kidner 70). It is God who has been spurned by his creation from the beginning of human history—indeed, even before human history. Proceeded by rebellious spiritual beings and spurred on by their instigation, the nations of men have rebelled against the authority of God throughout every generation. God’s eternal plan is the rectification of this disorder. Human salvation is but one aspect of a divine undertaking that ultimately seeks the full restoration of all creation (heaven and earth) to the purpose and will of a sovereign Creator (Acts 3:21).

Scripture is a record of God’s promises concerning this great plan. The first of these promises was made to the serpent in the garden and it stated in vague terms what the rest of the Old Testament unfolds. The seed of woman would accomplish God’s plan—specifically, the seed of Abraham who would be led in the last days by the seed of David. Thus, the promise to David (2 Samuel 7:14) fulfills the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), and the promise to Abraham fulfills the curse upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

The New Testament provides the final piece of the puzzle: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ overcomes the sin of man and makes certain the final victory over the forces of Satan. As the redeemed people of Christ, it is our duty to take up our spiritual arsenal and wage a war of faith against the enemies of God (2 Cor. 10:4-5). We must be diligent in carrying out our

these commentators fail to see the full significance of Genesis 3:15-16 and the way that it undergirds Paul’s teaching.

mission. Let us “tread down the wicked where they stand, hide them in the dust together” (Job 40:12). Let us “tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” (Luke 10:19). God will soon crush Satan under our feet!

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